

Propaganda at Home (Belgium)

By [Bénédicte Rochet](#)

August 1914: “Poor Little Belgium”, martyred by the German invader, became an effective symbol used by international belligerents to sharpen their propaganda weapons. However, in 1916, the rhetoric lost momentum; the image of the Belgian army suffered with the Allies and behind it, an entire nation seemed passive toward the occupant. Propaganda had to reorient and become more coordinated. The efficiency of this new direction is still difficult to assess today as Belgian propagandists were so dependent on the Allied countries in terms of techniques, human resources and the themes conveyed.

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Introduction

In August 1914, German troops invaded ‘little Belgium’, a neutral country. The occupying forces settled on national territory for almost four years while the Belgian [government](#) took refuge in Sainte-Adresse, near Le Havre in [France](#). [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) established his general headquarters in La Panne, behind the Yser frontline. [Propaganda at home](#) was very specific since the main target audience, namely Belgian citizens and soldiers, were either in national territory [occupied](#) by the enemy and fed with the occupier’s propaganda, or on the frontline where, unlike the other combatants on the [Western Front](#), they were completely cut off from their families and social networks, and consequently from any information on what was happening at home in the “homeland”. Only correspondence maintained a link, but it was weak and irregular. In addition to compatriots, propaganda also had to target belligerent (Allied and enemy) and neutral countries. This task was made difficult by the fact that [Belgium](#) was a young nation – it was less than 100 years old at the time. Other countries questioned the capacity of its army and its spirit of resistance,^[1] or discredited it due to its colonial policy in the 19th century. However, its brutal invasion on 4 August 1914 created a shock on the international scene. Overnight, Belgium formed the heart of war rhetoric and became a real symbol: on the side of the Entente, Belgium was represented as a martyred country whose [neutrality](#) had been violated; on the other side, Belgium was depicted as an artificial country whose neutrality was a sham.^[2]

The Belgian Case: Experimental Laboratory for Allied and Enemy Propaganda

Allied propaganda, particularly British, quickly seized the Belgian case and denounced the [atrocities](#) committed by German

troops against the civilian population. The brutality of the invader described as a bloodthirsty animal and rapist of “poor little” Belgium made headlines everywhere (press, posters and postcards). In the [United States](#), for example, the charity organization [Commission for Relief in Belgium](#) spread the image of a country in ruins, populated by starved women and [children](#).^[3] Emotion, sensationalism and exaggeration dominated in these narratives: “The children’s hands have been cut off!” The image shocked, frightened and gave meaning to the conflict, justifying, morally, the commitment of Franco-British troops on the battlefield as defenders of the law in the face of a monster devoid of all humanity. It was now good versus evil. German [propaganda](#) defended itself and proclaimed its self-defense against a Belgian civilian population of *francs-tireurs* who did not hesitate to gouge out the eyes of wounded Germans.^[4] In order to definitively implement these narratives within public opinion, the [governments](#) on both sides relied on the publication of official reports (the German White Book, the British Bryce Report,^[5] the Franco-Belgian Red Book, etc.) based on testimonials and numerous sources and translated into several languages. However, it was not the objectivity of the facts that was sought but rather their instrumentalization in order to feed military mobilization^[6] and reject the enemy’s assertions. At the beginning of the conflict, the “Belgian case” was an excellent laboratory for the Entente to experiment with propaganda, without any consultation with the Belgian authorities.^[7] In fact, Belgium did not need to take care of its own image, because Allied propaganda did. In this particular context, the first Belgian initiatives were essentially documentary, explanatory and defensive.

The Bureau Documentaire Belge: Scientific Rigor

In January 1915, [Charles de Broqueville](#) (1860-1940), head of the government and minister of war, decided to set up an organization at Le Havre responsible for gathering all the documentation on the war and its consequences for Belgium: the Bureau Documentaire Belge (BDB). He handed the management to lawyer and journalist [Fernand Passelecq](#) (1876-1951). Passelecq recruited his collaborators independently and trained them in documentary methods. For Passelecq, the scientific rigor of the information collected took precedence over the “mechanical means of advertising and the artifices of political propaganda”^[8]: “bourrage de crâne/brainwashing ..., an expedient that must be rejected by any government concerned with maintaining moral standards and doing lasting work”.^[9] The activities of the BDB,^[10] which had about thirty employees, most of whom were multilingual translators, focused mainly on the translation of newspapers and magazines written in German, Dutch, English, Italian and Spanish; on the daily publication of *Informations belges*, two pages intended for international press agencies and containing, among other things, [press](#) releases from the Belgian government in exile; and on the writing of rigorous studies aimed at re-establishing the truth about the Belgian situation, such as *Truth and Travesty. An Analytical Study of the Reply of the Belgian Government to the German White Book*, written by Passelecq in 1916. In this context, and more scientific than propagandist, sociologist [Fernand Van Langenhove](#) (1889-1982), secretary of the BDB, published a study on the question of the francs-tireurs and German violence against Belgian civilians during the invasion (translated into four languages, including German).^[11] Van Langenhove’s work differed from the official Allied reports by using German sources – soldiers’ testimonies, [press](#) articles, minutes – and social psychology. He demonstrated the process that took place within the German troops, as a “cycle” that had been established since the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, to create the legend of the “francs-tireurs”. According to Van Langenhove, this sincere belief in an illusory reality on the part of German soldiers explains the reasons for the transgression of moral lines (brutal acts against civilians, including women and children), which were nonetheless present in the Prussian army.^[12] The objectivity and rigor of the study conducted in the midst of the conflict is impressive even if, as [John Horne](#) has explained, “Van Langenhove underestimated the manipulation of the myth by the German military and did not account for the harshness of military reprisals”.^[13]

Although the work of the BDB was recognized – the historian Marc Bloch praised Van Langenhove’s book after the war for its “rare psychological intelligence”^[14] – it was not enough to restore Belgium’s image. Moreover, in 1915, the image of a martyred Belgium and its desolation was outdated and even began to harm the nation. Some Allied countries asked themselves if the Belgian army still existed, if Belgium could be considered an actor in the conflict? Belgium’s defensive action through documentary propaganda was no longer sufficient.

The Office de Propagande Belge: Coordination and Distribution of Tasks

The year 1916 marked a significant turning point in Belgian propaganda. The government in Le Havre created a new

coordinating agency in June 1916: the Office de Propagande Belge (OPB). The office was placed under the aegis of a governmental propaganda committee. This committee was composed of the main ministers in exile, OPB director [Joseph Mélot \(1873-1943\)](#),^[15] Fernand Passelecq of the BDB and a few officials from foreign affairs. The OPB planned to use all available media: daily press, brochures, exhibitions, etc., but also the new media tools: [photography](#) and [cinema](#). Indeed, the government of Le Havre, in particular Minister of War de Brocqueville, gradually became aware of the importance of visual media. The belief in the capacity of these visual media to influence public opinion was very strong at that time: "The cinema produces on the public the most lively and most durable impression".^[16] Following the example of a similar development in France, the Belgian war department created several units to produce these visual materials: In November 1915 *Service photographique de l'armée belge* in Bourbourg; in August 1916 *Service cinématographique de l'armée belge* in De Panne^[17]; in 1916 *Section documentaire et artistique de l'Armée belge en campagne*. This [art](#) unit regrouped a series of artists who painted the landscapes of the front, notably the painter [Alfred Bastien \(1873-1955\)](#). As a volunteer, Bastien travelled to the frontline with his camera and sketchbook in order to produce his paintings, including *Panorama de la bataille de l'Yser* (1920-1921). The OPB worked in collaboration with these different army sections, which provided it with military documentation both in terms of information and visual material, and with the information and press services of the ministries, in particular foreign affairs. The office also coordinated the work of the Belgian propaganda offices in London, Washington and The Hague.

Beyond coordination, the significant turning point was also the political awareness that it was time to change Belgium's image among its allies. The aim was to impose the image of a belligerent nation instead of a martyred nation:

The time has come to highlight the heroic resistance and admirable energy of the Belgian nation, and we were thinking in particular of the valor of our soldiers, their spirit of initiative and the remarkable efforts made under your leadership to give our reconstituted army its greatest power.^[18]

Brave Little Belgium

The idea to spread: the Belgians are a valiant and fighting people, not only on the Yser Front but also in occupied territory. The idea was to show the existence of a single community of indignation and resistance to the invader, a solidarity between both fronts, the occupied home constituting a second front for the fatherland.^[19] In this idea of the unity of the nation, the image of King Albert and his leadership was omnipresent – the other Belgian military leaders were absent from the iconography. The myth of the *Roi Chevalier* was firmly established in this war iconography: a king most often on horseback, solemn. He attended the troops' parade; he gave [medals](#) to officers and soldiers; he received sovereigns ([George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#), [Victor-Emmanuel III, King of Italy \(1869-1947\)](#), etc.) and Allied military officials (notably the Frenchmen [Joseph Joffre \(1852-1931\)](#) and [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) or, in December 1917, the American [John Pershing \(1860-1948\)](#)). [Elisabeth of Bavaria, Queen of the Belgians \(1876-1965\)](#) also played a role in this propaganda of bravery; she was systematically associated with images evoking wounded soldiers or field infirmaries, and was admired by all. The king also appeared in popular songs, as in this verse from "la guerre bienfaisante": "[...] the King of the Belgians / At the head of his army / Defending his frontier against cruelties".^[20]

For technical reasons, it was very difficult to shoot images of the Belgian army in the heat of the action – the camera's tripod did not allow the operator to follow the soldier. As a result, most of the shots were re-enactments where the soldiers played their own role. It was also because of these technical deficiencies that one subject prevailed: the daily life of the soldiers with pictures of battle preparations (cleaning guns, working on [equipment](#)), fortification works on the trenches, supply of [food](#) and [artillery](#), caring for and transporting the wounded, and so on. These images suggested the fight but did not show it: no bayonet charges, no hand-to-hand fighting or shelling of the trenches. A further explanation for this was that the Yser Front was rather quiet and not very spectacular until the spring of 1918 and the liberating offensive. Moreover, it was not possible to take pictures of the underground [resistance](#) in occupied Belgium. As it was impossible to shoot the Belgians' bravery or the violence of the fight, photography and film units suggested it by showing emotional pictures like the ruins of towns and cities, roads, buildings and churches where the "before" and "after" pictures demonstrated the extent of the devastation. The ruins monopolized all supports. The press published numerous pictures of the emblematic monuments of Belgian heritage that were destroyed, as in this brochure published in Paris in 1915: *La guerre et les monuments. Cathédrale de Reims, Ypres, Louvain, Arras*.^[21]

The ruined heritage was also at the heart of the exhibitions organized in the major European capitals from 1916 onwards. The

first exhibition of war photographs of the Allied armies (1 October to 2 November 1916), organized in Paris by the section photographique de l'armée française, brought together 2,000 photographs from the French, English, Belgian, Italian and Serbian photographic sections taken on all the fronts. The Service photographique de l'armée belge presented 200 photos classified under two themes: "the pitiful ruins" and "the means of revenge and repair".^[22] All these pictures were evidence to reinforce the accusation directed at the German aggressor: "These ruins point the finger of blame, they shout: You are the criminal!"^[23] They also helped to reinforce a Belgian national identity^[24] around its monuments, heritage and fully valued past.

The fatherland – a word that still had its full meaning at the beginning of the 20th century – under attack must be defended. The theme of the bravery of the Belgian army also had to be propagated within the army itself. Postcards and patriotic prints played a part in this, as did the trench press written by the War Ministry, such as *Le Courrier de l'armée / De Legerbode*. These newspapers regularly adopted "a propagandist tone, sometimes close to brainwashing. As an authorities' press ... they sought throughout the war to keep the hatred of the enemy intact or to popularize the image of the Roi Chevalier".^[25]

This discourse of a brave little Belgium also had to be disseminated among the Belgian population in occupied territory. This dissemination seemed to be more a matter of individual initiatives, of moral resistance on the part of certain citizens, than of a centralized mechanism by the Belgian government in exile. And it was a fortiori exclusively underground. Two media were used in particular: the press and postcards. The underground press activity was sustained by networks of people from the urban middle classes, most of them Catholic. Seventy-nine underground papers were identified.^[26] According to [Sophie De Schaepdrijver](#) and [Emmanuel Debruyne](#), "no other European occupied territory, in 1914-1918, produced such an intensive underground discourse".^[27] The production was most intense in 1915-1916. The most famous of them was *La Libre Belgique* (*Free Belgium*) which was published from February 1915 to November 1918. All 171 issues were widely distributed thanks to a network of more than 700 people (editors, composers, printers, distributors). Patriotism, the Christian faith and solidarity between Belgians and with soldiers at the front were the themes favored by *Free Belgium*.^[28] The postcard was a medium that reached its peak during the First World War – several million postcards travelled during this period – and that participated in propaganda through the images and representations it conveyed. Patriotic postcards with the royal family as their central theme circulated in occupied Belgium. They were either handmade or were old postcards of the king that booksellers sold despite the prohibition imposed by the occupant. But it is very difficult, if not impossible, to measure the circulation and distribution of these underground media.^[29]

Conclusion

Were the Belgian propaganda offices able to meet the challenge? Were they able to impose the image of a fighting Belgium? On the international scene, the challenge was probably too difficult. Certainly, the situation improved after the creation of the new propaganda services at the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917. Nevertheless, they lacked human resources and "never had complete control over the image of Belgium and it continued to be instrumentalized by others. In fact, the myth was so powerful that their action was probably doomed to inevitable failure..."^[30] The political situation of Belgium in the field of nations at the time of the [Treaty of Versailles](#) confirms this decline in its international popularity.^[31]

Belgian combatants and civilians, whether at the front or in occupied territory, were not totally fooled by these patriotic prints and visuals designed to keep up their enthusiasm: for example, *Le Courrier de l'armée* was renamed "le bourreur de crânes".^[32] However, the people were not passive and this propaganda was based on social representations anchored in the population and shared by all: the defense of the fatherland was a just and sacred cause. Recent research has shown that the propaganda of the First World War maintained pre-existing representations and [stereotypes](#).^[33]

The iconographic analysis of Alfred Bastien's *Panorama de l'Yser*, a painting produced in 1920-1921 and exhibited throughout the inter-war period, shows that the propaganda message about the bravery of the Belgian army was tenacious. The painting offers a vision of the entire Belgian front from De Panne to Ypres without being in conformity with historical reality:

The dunes and Nieuport occupy more than half of the panorama, whereas they only constitute a quarter of the landscape in reality. Diksmuide and Ypres are only briefly mentioned... The aim is to highlight this strategic point on the front, which recalls the role of the Belgian army in stopping the German advance thanks to the flooding of the

Yser plain (October 1914).^[34]

Notes

1. ↑ Kesteloot, Chantal: Regards, in: Jaumain, Serge et al. (eds.): Une guerre totale? La Belgique dans la Première Guerre mondiale, Brussels 2005, p. 333.
2. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: Deux patries. La Belgique entre exaltation et rejet, 1914-1918, in: Cahiers d'Histoire du Temps présent 7 (2000), p. 17.
3. ↑ Amara, Michaël: La propagande belge et l'image de la Belgique aux Etats-Unis pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, in: Revue Belge d'Histoire contemporaine 1-2 (2000), pp. 173-226.
4. ↑ Horne, John: Les mains coupées. Atrocités allemandes et opinion française en 1914, in: Becker, Jean-Jacques et al. (eds.): Guerre et cultures 1914-1918, Paris 1994, pp. 133-146; Kramer, Alan: Les atrocités allemandes. Mythologie populaire, propagande et manipulation dans l'armée allemande, in: Becker et al., Guerre 1994, pp. 147-164.
5. ↑ Report of the Committee on Alleged German Outrages Appointed by His Britannic Majesty's Government and Presided over by the Right Hon. Viscount Bryce, O.M., London, 1915. See Wilson, Trevor: Lord Bryce's Investigation into Alleged German Atrocities in Belgium, 1914-1915, in: Journal of Contemporary History 14/3 (1979), pp. 369-383.
6. ↑ On this subject, see Hodges, Paul: The Plight of Belgium and the British Soldier, in Jaumain et al., Guerre 2005, pp. 367-376.
7. ↑ Serodes, Fabrice: La propagande anglophobe allemande en Belgique occupée pendant la Grande Guerre. D'une tentative délicate de transfert culturel de l'anglophobie française en Belgique, in: Rochet, Bénédicte / Tixhon, Axel (eds.): La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre. Une icône, des images, Namur 2012, p. 37.
8. ↑ Archives générales du Royaume (Brussels, Belgium), fonds du BDB-n°2, Note de Fernand Passelecq sur l'opportunité de maintenir le BDB après la guerre, 25 octobre 1918.
9. ↑ Archives générales du Royaume (Brussels, Belgium), fonds du BDB n°195, Lettre de Passelecq au ministre des affaires étrangères, Le Havre, 15 octobre 1917 [translated by author, as are all subsequent quotes originally in French].
10. ↑ Depoortere, Rolande: Inventaire des archives du Bureau Documentaire Belge (1915-1920), Brussels 1994, p. 5.
11. ↑ Van Langenhove, Fernand: Comment naît un cycle de légendes. Francs-tireurs et atrocités en Belgique, Lausanne et al. 1916.
12. ↑ Benvindo, Bruno / Majerus, Benoît / Vrints, Antoon: La Grande Guerre des historiens belges, 1914-2014, in: Journal of Belgian History 44/2-3 (2014), pp. 170-196.
13. ↑ Horne, John: Belgian Intellectuals and the German Invasion, 1914-15, in: Jaumain et al., Guerre 2005, p. 400.
14. ↑ Quoted by De Schaepdrijver, Deux 2000, p. 20.
15. ↑ The diplomat Fernand Peltzer was in charge of the OPB from June to September 1916, when he was appointed Belgian ambassador in Bern. He was replaced by another diplomat: Joseph Mélot. Mélot arrived from Greece where he had been Belgian ambassador since 1911. He launched several propaganda actions against the German invader from his position as diplomat. In September 1916, he was on leave in Le Havre and hired as director of the OPB without any precise explanation. His knowledge of the problems in the Balkans? His propaganda initiatives? This is not clearly specified in the sources. After the war, Mélot was involved in the League of Nations. See Dumoulin, Michel: Joseph Mélot (1873-1943), in: Biographie Nationale de Belgique, volume 41, Brussels 1979.
16. ↑ Musée Royal de l'Armée (Brussels-Belgium), fonds inconnu ex A32/225, farde 4, Office Belge de Propagande au ministre de la guerre, avril 1918.
17. ↑ On this subject, see Rochet, Bénédicte: A State Cinematographic Practice in Wartime. The Belgian Army Film Unit 1916-1922, in: Tijdschrift voor Mediageschiedenis 19/1 (2016), pp. 23-33.
18. ↑ Musée Royal de l'Armée (Brussels, Belgium), fonds inconnu ex A32/225, farde 1, Décision du comité gouvernemental de propagande, lettre de H. Carton de Wiart à Ch. Broqueville, 20 juin 1916.
19. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie: Vivre l'occupation, in: Jaumain et al., Guerre 2005, p. 111.
20. ↑ Collection de la Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine de Nanterre. Quoted in Serodes, Fabrice: La propagande anglophobe allemande en Belgique occupée pendant la Grande Guerre. D'une tentative délicate de transfert culturel de l'anglophobie française en Belgique, in: Rochet / Tixhon, La petite Belgique 2012, p. 37.
21. ↑ Magne, Lucien: La guerre et les monuments. Cathédrale de Reims, Ypres, Louvain, Arras, Paris 1915.
22. ↑ Bar, Jean: L'exposition interalliée de photographies de guerre, in: Courrier de l'armée 339 and 340 (4 and 7 November 1916), p. 1.
23. ↑ Final title card of the film sequence "Ypres 2", probably dating from 1920.
24. ↑ Stengers, Jean / Gubin, Eliane: Histoire du sentiment national en Belgique des origines à 1918, volume 2, Brussels 2002.

25. ↑ Benvido, Bruno: Des hommes en guerre. Les soldats belges entre ténacité et désillusion 1914-1918, Brussels 2005, p. 124. On this subject, see, Helaers M.: De vijand. Een portret door De Legerbode (1914-1918), in: Revue belge d'histoire militaire 2/3 (1991), pp. 105-207.
26. ↑ Hirsch, Francois: Les "soldats de la plume". La presse clandestine en Belgique occupée pendant la Première guerre mondiale, Brussels 2006.
27. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Sophie / Debruyne, Emmanuel: *Sursum Corda*. The Underground Press in Occupied Belgium, 1914-1918, in: First World War Studies 4/1 (2013), pp. 23-38.
28. ↑ Debruyne, Emmanuel: Combattre l'occupant en Belgique et dans les départements français occupés en 1914-1918. Une "résistance avant la lettre"?, in: Vingtieme Siecle. Revue d'Histoire 115/3 (2012), pp. 15-30.
29. ↑ On this subject, see Delhalle, Sophie: La Belgique dans la carte postale de 1914-1918. De la propagande à la culture de guerre, in: Rochet / Tixhon, La petite Belgique 2012, pp. 129-151.
30. ↑ Amara, Michaël: Les grands défis de la propagande belge durant la Première Guerre mondiale, in: Rochet / Tixhon, La petite Belgique 2012, pp. 21-35.
31. ↑ De Schaepdrijver, Deux patries 2000, p. 48.
32. ↑ Benvido, Des hommes 2005, p. 123.
33. ↑ Van Ypersele, Laurence / Wouters, Nico (eds): Nations, Identities and the First World War. Shifting Loyalties to the Fatherland, London 2018, p. 3.
34. ↑ Peeters, Natacha / Smets, Sandrine, La guerre vue à 360°. Le Panorama de la bataille de l'Yser d'Alfred Bastien au Musée royal de l'Armée et d'Histoire militaire à Bruxelles, in: Rochet / Tixhon, La petite Belgique 2012, p. 180.

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